

Rosie the Riveter

FORT WORTH, Texas — Her husband had just died in a car wreck. Rose Will Monroe was trying to flee poverty. She piled her son and daughter onto a bus in 1942. Monroe was determined to find work at the Willow Run airplane plant in Ypsilanti, Mich. She wanted to fly planes. But with two kids, the military kept the 22-year-old widow on the ground.

Monroe, a “tomboy” daughter of a carpenter, went to work. She operated a 6.8-pound tool called a rivet hammer to help build planes. The hammer put rivets into planes to hold them together, just like nails do.

Monroe was just one of 6 million American women who entered the workforce during World War II. She came to represent them all. Monroe became “Rosie the Riveter,” the symbol of the tough, hardworking woman who helped win the war.

"We Can Do It"

Fort Worth, Texas, is a long way from Ypsilanti, where Monroe and her co-workers built 8,685 B24 bombers. That's about one about every 56 minutes during the war. But “Rosies” in Fort Worth did just as well. They built 1,803 planes at a bomber plant, now owned by Lockheed Martin Corp. About 30,000 people worked in the plant during the war. Lockheed Martin officials aren't sure how many were women.

“Rosie the Riveter” was actually a mix of the experiences of many women. The “Rosies” were first made popular by a song. Soon, “Rosie” came to represent all women working to defend the country. “There were quite a few faces of Rosie,” said Monroe's daughter, Victoria Croston. She told her mother's story in honor of Women's History Month at Lockheed Martin on March 20.

Geraldine Hoff Doyle was the strong-armed model for the “We Can Do It” poster produced by Westinghouse Electric Corp. Doyle only worked for a few weeks in a military plant. She played the cello and realized how easily the work could damage her hands, Croston said. The poster of her was little-known during the war. But it became famous in the early 1980s as a symbol of women seeking acceptance and better pay at work.

Discovered At Willow Run

The best-known “Rosie” was Monroe, who starred in a series of promotional movies to raise money for the war. In 1944, she was discovered by an actor who visited Willow Run to shoot a movie. When he learned that there really was a riveter named Rose, he made her a showpiece of his movies. “She had the right name, the right job and was in the right place at the right time. You can't plan that,” Croston said. There was nothing glamorous about the hard work during the two years Monroe worked at the plant.

During the week, her son and daughter stayed at a co-worker's home. She lived in workers' housing at the plant. After going back home, she had a number of jobs before she became a home builder in southern Indiana. She also lived out her dream of flying in 1972. She later taught her daughter to fly.

Monroe's story is inspiring for today's "Rosies," said Gayle Roland, a top official at Lockheed. "They were so willing to pitch in and help," Roland said. She says their will to support the war effort is "beyond anything" she can understand.

Leading The Way

The "Rosies" led the way for women who work at companies that build planes and military equipment. Women make up 2,667 of Lockheed Martin's 12,500 workers in Fort Worth. Among them is Janet Nash, one of the people in charge of producing F-35s. Another woman, Marillyn Hewson, is the head of the company. She took over last year. "The work they did was incredible. Can you imagine holding that 6.8-pound rivet hammer for eight hours?" said Nash. She noted that a modern rivet hammer weighs 2.5 pounds.

Nash's grandmother was a "Rosie," who filed down metal parts in a plant. "Those Rosies, when they went home, they were tired," said Nash. She has risen up at Lockheed since starting as an engineer 32 years ago. Now she is one of 12 female vice presidents. She is the boss of about 2,000 people who work on the plant producing F-35s.

Women's jobs in her business "have changed a lot" since she started, Nash said. She was the first female vice president in charge of producing planes. When you are the first of something, "you want to make sure you do the right things," she said.

Quiz

1 What led to the origin of "Rosie the Riveter"?

- (A) Americans winning World War II
- (B) Women building 1,803 planes during the war
- (C) The experiences of several women made popular by a song
- (D) Monroe acting in promotional films to raise money

2 Select the paragraph from "Discovered At Willow Run" that describes why Monroe became an inspiration for today's women.

3 Which of the following contains a word or phrase that is a synonym for "contribute"?

- (A) Monroe was just one of 6 million American women who entered the workforce during World War II.
- (B) "Rosie the Riveter" was actually a mix of the experiences of many women.
- (C) They were so willing to pitch in and help.
- (D) Women make up 2,667 of Lockheed Martin's 12,500 workers in Fort Worth.

4 Which of the following contains a word or phrase that means "responsible"?

- (A) Monroe was determined to find work at the Willow Run airplane plant in Ypsilanti, Mich.
- (B) She came to represent them all.
- (C) Among them is Janet Nash, one of the people in charge of producing F-35s.
- (D) But it became famous in the early 1980s as a symbol of women seeking acceptance and better pay at work.